

LEAP

On the occasion of its ninetieth anniversary in 2005, the Association of American Colleges and Universities launched Liberal Education and America's Promise: Excellence for Everyone as a Nation Goes to College (LEAP), a ten-year national campaign to champion the value of a liberal education.

For additional information about the LEAP campaign and how to get involved, see www.aacu.org/advocacy.

track with Liberal Education and America's

As the vast majority of family-supporting jobs now require postsecondary training and education, children's aspirations for college are nearly universal. Low-income and minority students are likely, though, to fall into yawning achievement gaps, or stumble over tuition costs, or bump up against parents' anachronistic attitudes toward college and confusing protocols that keep them from matriculating—or convert them into attrition statistics.

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But more precise definitions of the essential outcomes of a liberal education for a student, state, and nation requires empowering the entire community to enter the debate. With broad commitment and bold leadership, this campaign can help inform how government and educational institutions evolve to support citizens' success in this time of flux, drive development of appropriate metrics to measure their effectiveness and assign responsibility for meeting those goals, and invite unprecedented partnerships to sustain them.

- It sidelines partisan rhetoric to focus public policy on the real engine for smart growth and development—an intellectually agile workforce functioning as an ethical, engaged citizenry.
- It responds to prevailing wisdom that business performance and national prosperity today depend on the creation and application of new knowledge, on our ability to innovate.



at Home and Abroad

Liberal Education's New Premium

BARBARA LAWTON



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- It reestablishes the value of the work of the academy in mining, maintaining, and building knowledge.
- It calls on the archetypal attributes of our nation's founders: creativity, innovation, risk taking, and entrepreneurship.
- It should trigger better understanding of how education policy from pre-kindergarten through grade twelve must be aligned in a continuum to support these goals, resulting in more cost-effective public investments. Think of LEAP as a powerful centrifugal force for necessary change.
- Finally, it builds on the strength of democracy and, with its implicit demand for unprecedented partnerships, reinforces our democratic system.

The challenges we face

Challenges lay ahead, notably the surprising lack of familiarity with the idea of a liberal education among so many students and their families. Added to this is a generalized distrust of all that is modified by the word "liberal." Too many students think of their college education as a private rather than public good, ignorant of the fact that the public and private sectors already underwrite a significant portion of the cost.

Other obstacles to hurdle are within the academy, where the self-referential language used often confounds would-be consumers and holds them at a distance. We can't build public confidence in higher education without giving the public a sense of fluency when speaking about it, without giving them a way to think about it and the words to support it.

Many academics' strong sense of responsibility for, and their comfort in, the tradition of liberal education translates into apprehension about "watering it down"—and is read by the public as persistent elitism. Academics are, reliably and responsibly, skeptical about confusing the pursuit of truth with the pursuit of profit. And in my experience, academic administrators and faculty too often struggle to

articulate their own case for a liberal education, and are utterly naive about the political context in which they work.

Added to these challenges is the fact that alumni have been better developed as donors than as advocates. And the business community does not fully understand how the financial picture of too many educational institutions breeds a fragility that has an impact far beyond the reach of their campuses.

The University of Wisconsin System

So what will LEAP look like? Let's talk about the University of Wisconsin (UW), an ideal selection to pilot LEAP for many reasons that play to our state's strengths and weaknesses. Wisconsin boasts twenty liberal arts colleges, and a network of forty-seven technical colleges and twenty-six UW campuses, with recently improved articulation between the latter two, for a total of well over half a million students pursuing postsecondary studies at some level.

But for all our capacity, we have not done well at enrolling and graduating low-income and minority students. In fact, we have seen a decline in recent years. And Wisconsin is becoming an immigrant state, much as we were in the early part of the twentieth century. Only this time, the immigrants are the Hmong, Somalis, Sudanese, and Latinos, not the Poles, Belgians, Norwegians, and Germans.

At the same time, Wisconsin is facing a workforce crisis that is coming at us like a steaming train. We have a higher than average percentage of baby boomers, smaller young generation, a declining birth rate, and a disturbingly high net out-migration of bright college graduates.

The University of Wisconsin—Madison was recently named the nation's number-one research university, but it is the flagship for a state that ranks thirty-fifth out of fifty in terms of the percentage of workers aged twenty-five and older who carry the credential of a baccalaureate. We are a low-wage state; we know we need to



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**Barbara Lawton,
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increase the number of citizens carrying a baccalaureate degree. You would think it an easy job to convince our lawmakers to maintain a strong and accessible university system, but the numbers tell a different story.

General purpose state revenue (GPR) to the UW System has fallen precipitously over the

past ten years. Our contribution per FTE is 14 percent below the national average, lodging us solidly in the bottom at number forty-six. GPR as a percentage of the university system budget has followed national trends; at 24 percent, it is only half of what it was thirty years ago. If we slice the numbers to show



Members of the LEAP National Leadership Council met twice during the spring to refine a set of “Principles of Excellence for Undergraduate Education,” which will be released in early 2007. These face-to-face meetings followed a series of phone conferences through which council members discussed the principles and important messages of the LEAP campaign. Through these principles and the advocacy activities of the LEAP campaign, council members want to make it clear to the nation that changes in the global economy have made liberal education an imperative for all of today’s college students.

Student Essay Winners Announced

The first annual competition attracted more than 115 essays, and was open to undergraduate students at each of the UW System's twenty-six campuses. In addition to the three scholarship recipients, honorable mentions were awarded to essay writers Dawn Freese, Jennifer Ernie, and Laura Cummings.

Other signs of legislative hostility include bills to criminalize stem-cell research and prohibit dispensing of emergency contraception at UW student clinics. It is only fair to mention at this point that UW administrators themselves generated what seemed like an

I am confident we will recapture the public's imagination and re-center liberal education in our plans for Wisconsin's future. Campus–community dialogues on this very topic are happening across the state. The faculty has been engaged to anchor their courses in the context of a liberal education right in the class syllabus. President Kevin Reilly will soon announce his Council on Diversity, and our state's PK–16 Leadership Council is a natural vehicle through which we could set up a seamless way of thinking about what constitutes adequate preparation to contribute in a knowledge economy.

LEAP gives us a powerful controlling metaphor to turn all public discourse related to the university into a conversation about how our investment in education connects to our economic outlook. What would success look like?

- PK–12 education will drive more, and more diverse, well-prepared students to pursue a liberal education.
- There will be integrity to our campaign: even as we aspire to determined inclusion to ensure access for a diverse student body, each institution of higher learning must



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Annual Meeting

examine its own practices related to equal opportunity for women and minorities in its employ, and bring them into alignment with its goals for students.

- Undergraduate programs will follow the lead of top business schools, and introduce more interdisciplinary work to foster more creative problem solving in an increasingly complex world.
- Expanded undergraduate research opportunities will underscore and strengthen the

relationship between scholarly work, creativity, multiple disciplines, and the community.

- The state will create a visible matrix of opportunity to help students connect the dots between a liberal arts degree and their career aspirations.
- Institutions of higher education will collaborate with the state to define and collect the data necessary to drive effective advocacy with vivid, convincing narratives.

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Annual Meeting



- The argument for public investment to make a liberal education broadly accessible and affordable will be data-driven and advanced in economic terms. And the metrics to gauge return on that investment will measure progress of both students and of the community and state, and will be checked annually to ensure that we stay on course.
- That argument for investment in a liberal education will emphasize the importance of preserving the independence of our great universities if they are to both rise above and serve the competing interests of those in the private sector.
- There will be a statewide echo of public testimony as to the value of a liberal education, led by the business community, recorded by the media, and repeated in a wide variety of settings by unexpected voices.
- The media will provide ongoing coverage of the campaign as a project of civic journalism.
- We will be strategic: instead of just lobbying legislative leaders, we will create for them a constituency for reinvestment in liberal education, one characterized by a sense of joint ownership, across sectors, for success.
- Lawmakers will respond by committing to maintaining a system of higher education that balances the twin demands of excellence and mass access.
- LEAP will require and foster bold, collaborative leadership, with participation from the academy, the state house, and the private sector.

Our task is to ensure that our nation builds the workforce necessary to stay in front in an era of global competition. From Green Bay to New York to Austin to San Diego, the promise of opportunity—for women, for minorities and children of immigrants, for young professionals, for established and upstart businesses—depends on the possibility in each place of upward mobility beginning on the bottom rung of the socioeconomic ladder.

We can guarantee that mobility—and, therefore, a robust and productive workforce, increased earnings, and a more desirable climate for investment—if we build confidence in and access to a great liberal education.

Back to that budget provision. I truly believe that the commitment our states and our nation must make to higher education can only proceed from a common and clear understanding of its enduring public value. We must engage all citizens to own the outcome of public debate that sets our priorities. A system of grants administered by the federal government will merely add another layer of bureaucracy and create greater distance between citizens and education issues.

LEAP's premise that intellectual rigor and virtue in multiple disciplines are practical survival tools for twenty-first-century life, if broadly accepted, will inevitably drive government and educational institutions to evolve, to innovate in response. It will indeed, then, become the framework by which we write our nation's future. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author's name on the subject line.

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